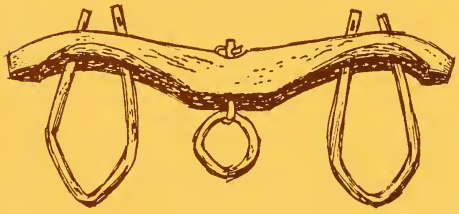
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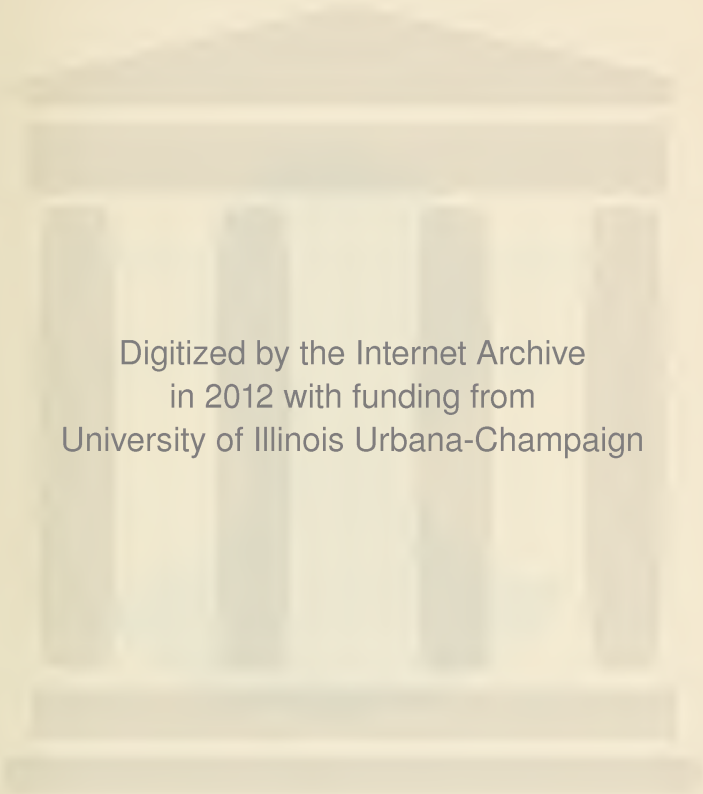
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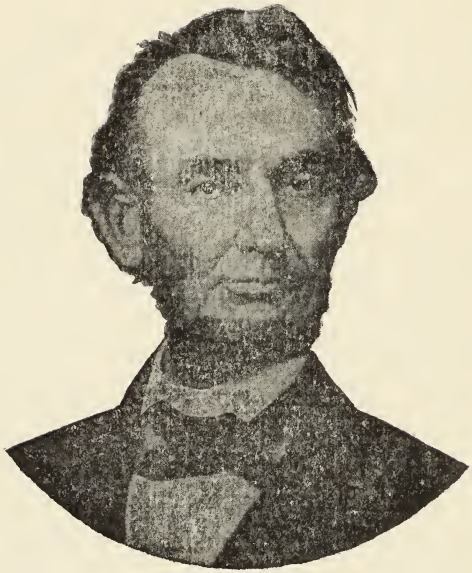
Personal Reminiscences of Abraham Lincoln

BY

GEORGE W. SHAW


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INTRODUCTION

THE Ethical Club of Geneseo is an association of ladies and gentlemen for the study of ethics, history and literature. While engaged on the history of the commencement of the Civil war, they requested me to give personal recollections of Abraham Lincoln. The following remarks were made and partly published in The Geneseo News. I have revised and enlarged The News' report at the request of Mr. J. B. Oakleaf, of Moline.

GEO. W. SHAW.

Geneseo, Ill., Nov. 16, 1911.

Personal Reminiscences of Lincoln

MY boyhood was spent in the village of Tremont, in Tazewell county, Illinois. The place was founded in 1835 by a colony consisting principally of people from New England and Eastern New York. The county already had some population consisting largely of settlers from Kentucky and Tennessee. The earlier comers looked askance at the new colonists for a short time, but it soon appeared that there was a bond of union. The men from the South were largely Whigs, warm admirers of Henry Clay. The Eastern men were of the same party and with like admiration for the great champion of a protective tariff.

Tazewell county became one of the Whig oases in the great democratic desert of Illinois. The position of Tremont was central and it became the county seat. About 1840 a new court house was built, which was one of the best the state could boast. It was the pride of our people. Not until ten years thereafter did Chicago have as good a one.

To our court house came judges and lawyers, mostly Springfield men, some of whom obtained distinction in later years. Judge Treat was on our circuit. He was afterwards Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of Illinois, and subsequently and up to his death a U. S. Circuit Judge. Judge Davis was on our circuit. He afterwards became one of the justices of the U. S. Supreme Court. Judge Logan, who left the bench after no long tenure of judicial position, was for many of his later years the recognized head of the Springfield bar. The attorneys I mainly remember were John Stewart, able, dignified and amiable—a man of model character; Ben Edwards, a skillful and indomitable practician; Abraham Lincoln and Edward D. Baker. My attention was early attracted by the appearance of Lincoln. His height and his shabbiness were marked peculiarities. He wore a linen coat much the worse for wear, a very cheap straw hat, linen trousers, apt to be tucked into the tops of his boots.

His homeliness was phenomenal. His face was angular and irregular; his exceedingly long legs aggravated his height; his arms dangled awkwardly. I have met with a magazine article which attempted to prove him a handsome man. Mr. Lincoln had no such

illusion. He told of himself the following story: He had made a vow that if he should ever encounter a man homelier than himself he would shoot him. Years passed before anything occurred to recall the vow, until one day when out hunting he came upon a man who seemed to excel him in ugliness. He was about to shoot when the victim remonstrated and asked for an explanation. When the vow was told him he surveyed Mr. Lincoln attentively and said resignedly: "Well, stranger, if I am homelier than you, shoot!" The homicide must have been considered justifiable, for Mr. Lincoln was not indicted.

But though not handsome, Mr. Lincoln was an attractive man. The homely face beamed with intelligence and good humor. The farmers who attended court with their cases of trespass by cattle at large, felt on intimate terms with a man so completely one of themselves, and long before he was old he was called "Old Abe Lincoln," as school boys called their playmates old fellows.

I have mentioned another man of subsequent fame—Edward D. Baker. He was a man remarkable alike for the strength of his judgment and the brilliancy of his imagination. He took an active part in the politics of the time, was a supporter of Clay in 1844 and was

elected to Congress. When the Mexican war broke out in 1846, he, in common with many Whigs (Lincoln included) volunteered. They were anxious to avoid the imputation of want of patriotism. Baker became colonel of a regiment and soon assumed such a position in the army that he commanded a brigade at the storming of Monterey, and I think at Buena Vista. His regiment was then transferred from the army of Taylor to that of Scott. In the battles on the march to the capital he commanded a brigade.

Returning to Illinois, he found that many Whigs who had opposed the war were alienated from him by the part he had taken and he was not the unquestioned head of the Whig party in the state. He went to California at the time of the great emigration, and took a high place among the bar of San Francisco; but the political distinction he desired did not await him there. He removed to Oregon and in 1860 was elected to the United States Senate. He was at last in his proper place. He had no period of timid silence while the rules are learned, but stepped at once to the front among such men as Sumner and Fessenden. His scarification of Breckenridge hastened the exit of that traitor from the Senate. He volunteered in the Union army and his splendid

military career in Mexico secured him at once a regiment. He took the field in command of a brigade, and at Ball's Bluff encountered a superior force of the enemy. Advised to retreat, he said: "With my antecedents I cannot turn my back upon the enemy." He fell on the field of battle.

"Fit couch it seemed for consular
And senator of Rome."

He seemed like a Roman Senator of the best days of the Republic; wise in halls of council; valiant and able on fields of battle; eloquent in the forum. I have heard many public speakers of high repute, Wendell Phillips, Rufus Choate, Thomas Corwin, George Thompson, the English parliamentarian; and pulpit orators, Beecher, Chapin, Alexander Campbell; but the impression is firmly fixed in my mind that I have heard but two great orators. One of these was Edward D. Baker, the other was Daniel Webster.

We cherish, as we ought, the memory of our leaders who fought the great conflict to a finish. Let us also cherish the memories of those two mighty champions of the Union who fell on the threshold of the strife—Lyon and Baker.

Diverted for a moment, I return to Lincoln. To my knowledge he was in my boyhood recog-

nized as a sound and able lawyer. In 1844 a controversy arose in Tazewell county on a proposal to change the county seat, and the question was discussed what the result of a change would be as to the ownership of the ground donated and hitherto used as the site of the court house. An election was held and in a handbill circulated to influence votes an opinion of Mr. Lincoln was published which shows sound legal sense.

In that year a presidential election occurred. Mr. North, late of Kewanee, has told me how, during that campaign, he was a fellow passenger with Mr. Lincoln on a voyage 'round the lakes from Chicago to Buffalo. To while away time a political debate was held, at which Mr. Lincoln represented the Whig and Mr. North the Abolitionist party. Both agreed in opposition to the annexation of Texas, but differed as to the abolition of slavery. Mr. North viewed it as a measure necessary to the continuance of the nation. Mr. Lincoln took the common and constitutional view that slavery was merely a local question. Mr. Lincoln adhered to that view for years, but at last learned better. Even in those times, however, a young Abolitionist attorney could give an able and experienced Whig speaker a hard task.

I think it was in 1846 that we school boys were stirred by the rumor that Mr. Lincoln and Mr. Douglas were to fight a duel. We sympathized according to our politics, or rather our fathers' politics, and desired the triumph of one or the other of the supposed combatants. It was long before I learned that the other party was General Shields, who took offense at some of Lincoln's jokes and challenged him.

I think it was in 1847 that, while attending court in Tremont, Mr. Lincoln was invited to speak on temperance. Public opinion was strong in favor of temperance in those times, and almost every citizen of the place who could make a temperance address took his turn. It was the turn of the pastor of the principal church that evening, but he merely made some opening remarks and closed saying: "I will now give place to the strong man."

Mr. Lincoln rose to his full height and said: "If my reverend friend had said the long man, he would have hit it."

His following remarks were strongly in favor of total abstinence, and he earnestly advised the boys to sign the pledge.

In 1849 the effort of Pekin to become the county seat of Tazewell was renewed. An act of the Legislature was obtained in February

and an election held in September. The change was contrary to the interests and wishes of the people of the county, but fortune favored Pekin. The movement to the gold diggings of California was at full height. A steamboat load of emigrants was detained on a sand-bar in the Illinois, and the passengers were brought to town and voted. Whisky flowed freely, general hilarity prevailed, and the election was won. One of those who joined the sportive throng and cast an illegal vote was Mr. Lincoln, who happened to be in Pekin at the time. It was a thoughtless joke of a jocose man, but one of the processes by which what Mr. Lincoln in his Gettysburg address calls "government of the people, by the people and for the people" so quickly perishes from the earth.

For some years about that time I saw nothing of Mr. Lincoln. In the spring of 1854 I went to Springfield to study law. I read in the office of Stewart & Edwards. There on my arrival I met a student who had been reading some time before me—Shelby M. Cullom. We had grown up in Tazewell without knowing each other, but our fathers were political and personal friends and we readily fraternized. I mentioned him because he is a man on whose character and career Mr. Lin-

coln exercised a great influence. He has imitated the methods of Lincoln and become as adroit and successful a politician as Lincoln himself.

Mr. Lincoln was a frequent visitor at the office and I used to listen with interest to the conversations between him and Mr. Stewart. They were friends of many years' standing. They had been together in the Black Hawk war. To them that war was a kind of picnic in a region now known as Henry and Whiteside counties. Mr. Stewart facetiously remarked, on seeing a newspaper report that Congress was about to make some appropriations for the soldiers of that war: "That Black Hawk war is a mine of wealth. I got a title and a quarter section, and now there is something more to come."

Lincoln and Stewart were free and social and talked of their cases and their fees. Lincoln remarked that during the past year he had booked some $2,500. He said it had taken him a good while to learn to make charges. "I had a good deal to get over," he said, and told how once down on the river he was in a skiff watching the departure of a steamboat, when two gentlemen came running down to the bank with a trunk, and one said to him: "If you will put us on that boat we will pay you

well." "I rowed hard for two hours and got them on board," said Mr. Lincoln. "One of them dropped two dollars into my boat. The pay was so big that it took me a long time to get over it. You see I had a good deal to get over."

They talked of the Illinois Central case and, with some amusement, of Chicago attorneys who had sneered at the Springfield bar, and agreed they needed the good fees they had received as a solace to their wounded feelings. Their wounds seemed healed. One morning Mr. Lincoln came in very tired and gave a most amusing description of his efforts (finally successful) to catch his old horse out on the prairie.

He gave the following anecdote of a former rough and ready governor of Illinois: "I was down attending court at Carlinville. There was a big crowd and horse races. Tom Carlin was there. There was a failure of a horse jockey who was to ride a horse in which Tom had an interest, and he offered to ride. To reduce his weight he took off his clothes and rode the race plumb naked. After the race some dispute arose and before he put on his clothes he whipped a man."

To us students these conversations taught something of lawyers and the world.

The years 1854 and 1855 were years of chaos in partisan politics. The Whig party was much broken up and its component parts were moving in different directions. Many who were not unfavorable to the institution of slavery joined the Democrats; many joined the "Know Nothings"; many joined either the organized Free Soil party or the as yet hardly organized Republican party; some stood by the Whig party in inert uncertainty. Among the last was Lincoln.

In February, 1855, a sensational election occurred. The Democratic candidate was the then governor, Joel Matteson; the Whig candidate Mr. Lincoln; the Free Soil candidate Judge Lyman Trumbull. The legislature balloted a good many times, all parties remaining firm. Much excitement prevailed. At last, when it became evident that the Free Soilers would not yield, and that a Democrat would probably be elected, Mr. Lincoln advised his supporters to vote for Judge Trumbull. Doubtless all the while Mr. Lincoln concurred in his own mind with Mr. Trumbull as to the necessity of excluding slavery from the territories. At last when indignation at the Kansas outrages had given great volume to the Republican movement, he fell in, and in a state convention held at Bloomington in June, 1856, made a speech

which gave him the position of the most influential leader of the Republican party of Illinois. In that year he canvassed the state for Fremont. I was then living in Tazewell county, and heard him at Tremont and Pekin. His ideas were clearly and forcibly expressed. He said:

"They tell me that if the Republicans prevail, slavery will be abolished, and whites and blacks will marry and form a mongrel race. Now, I have a sister-in-law down in Kentucky, and if any one can show me that if Fremont is elected she will have to marry a negro, I will vote against Fremont, and if that isn't an argumentum ad hominem it is an argumentum ad womanum."

This joke never failed to bring down the house. And again:

"The constitution requires us to submit to an election of president in a lawful manner, and if Fremont is lawfully elected by a majority of the American people, and a minority won't submit to the election, we'll make 'em."

These brief extracts give a clear idea of his style and his position.

In Pekin he spoke one afternoon at a county convention, and in the evening again. A little scene in the afternoon meeting was characteristic of the period. There was present at the

convention a Mr. Durham, an influential citizen of Washington, Tazewell county, an ardent Whig, opposed to the disruption of the Whig party; a Kentuckian by birth and a friend of Mr. Lincoln. He interrupted Mr. Lincoln and contended against some of his views. A good deal of excitement arose in the audience, and Mr. Durham, apprehensive of being attacked, pulled out a pistol and declared his resolution to defend himself. I kept my eye on Mr. Lincoln, anxious that he should do or say nothing to offend either his new friends or the old line Whigs whom it was our great object to gain. His tact was equal to the occasion. He sat quietly till the confusion subsided and resumed his speech.

After his speech of that evening, my father had some conversation with him and told me that Mr. Lincoln felt discouraged. He said the negro had not yet served out his time.

After 1856 I scarce ever met Mr. Lincoln. The last time I recollect seeing him was during the summer of 1858, when I observed him at a distance crossing the court house square in Peoria. He was well dressed. As he disappeared from my sphere of observation he was emerging into public view.

The Lincoln I knew was a man of marked traits. He was a man of vigorous health, sup-

ported by regular and temperate habits. His temper was placid. In the discussions of law and politics he was habitually kind and respectful to opponents. His frame of mind was both natural and the result of experience as to the best way of meeting mankind. He was jovial, sometimes to excess. When on circuit at some country tavern, his feet on the table, the centre of an attentive audience as he retailed stories of every grade of wit and character one might see "Old Abe Lincoln" in all his glory. Though extremely jocose he was, like others of that class, subject to revulsions of feeling and periods of melancholy. The ear sensitive to the slightest murmur of merriment may catch the echo of grief's deepest tone. I once observed his face as he sat unoccupied in the court house, and was specially struck by its expression of deep and ominous gloom.

He was ambitious of political preferment and frequently a candidate for office, well equipped for obtaining votes by a keen knowledge of human nature. His laborious youth and professional manhood had brought him into contact with every class of men. As he had begun a common man, he loved common men. Sympathy with oppressed laboring men was the foundation of his political opinions.

He could touch the heart strings of a common jury with unerring tact.

Many years ago he was engaged in a jury trial at Washington, Ill. His opponent was a Mr. Merriman, a man who loved fun even better than Lincoln himself. The merits of the case were with Mr. Merriman and he felt too safe. On the occasion of some mistake in words or statement he remarked that it was evident that Mr. Lincoln had not received a college education. In his answering argument Mr. Lincoln said: "It is true as stated by Mr. Merriman that I have not enjoyed the benefit of a college education. While he was in college I was mauling rails at 25 cents a hundred to support my poor old mother with these hands." As he stood with his ample palms extended and with the air of a humble laboring man, his case was won. Next morning my brother-in-law, who had heard the trial, met one of the jurors. "Well, Mr. Burkley," he said, "you found in favor of Lincoln." "Yes," answered the juror, "it was right. He worked to support his poor old mother."

He was a man of clear ideas and had a concise and happy way of expressing them. His training in courts where the common law system of pleading prevailed and before juries contributed to his style, but nature had fur-

nished him with ability to express clear thought in impressive language. There was a conscious effort on his part to attain a proper way of "putting things."

As I was talking with him one day, some one remarked that law was only horse sense anyhow. He answered, "It is horse sense refined."

Once when a pretty expensive suit had been concluded I remarked, "Mr. Lincoln, that suit has cost the county three hundred dollars." He answered, "Yes, they do things quicker in Turkey, but perhaps our way is as good." The advantage he derived from his way of putting things appeared in his debate with Douglas.

His mind reached out beyond his sphere of law and politics. He is said to have been a reader of history. I know nothing on that point, but happened to hear of a case of scientific curiosity. When a law student I was boarding at the same hotel with that amiable gentleman and able lawyer, Judge Dickey, afterwards of the Supreme Court of our state. One day he put me this question: "Three men are to carry a long, heavy log. One is to take an end on his shoulder, the other two are to put a stick under the log, and each take an end of the stick on his shoulder. Where shall

they put the stick so that each of the men shall carry the same weight?"

I made a calculation and handed my result to the judge. "That is right," said he. "Lincoln and I had that question and we tried it with weights. That was the way it came out." Here was certainly a spark of the Baconian spirit.

It sometimes happens that a movement, a word or a sentence discloses a man's leading trait. One day in passing a store in Springfield I heard voices in animated discussion, and two men came out. They were no ordinary disputants. One was Judge Logan, the other Lincoln. I did not learn the subject of conversation. It closed with a remark of Lincoln, "But can you get the votes?" It was evident that while Mr. Lincoln conceded some position in point of merit, he was doubtful of its practicability. In his view correct divination of public opinion was the main feature of statesmanship, and an election the test of public opinion.

GEORGE W. SHAW

Geneseo, Ill., Nov. 16, 1911.

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